

Walleye won't take bait

BY RON PETRIE, THE LEADER-POST JUNE 1, 2009



Ron Petrie on media day at the Saskatchewan Walleye Trail.

Photograph by: Bryan Schlosser, Leader-Post

LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE — Pro fishing boat? Check. Pro gear and tackle? Check. I'm outfitted to the max. What's more, beside me in the boat, offering advice, is one of Saskatchewan's leading walleye anglers.

Five hours we've been at it.

One might think Saskatchewan's provincial fish, as proclaimed in 2005 by the Legislature, wouldn't be so camera shy.

Nothing. Not even a nibble. I'm almost hoping the cellphone does ring, with one of the bosses calling to find out where in the Land of Living Skies I went this week without telling anybody. At least then I could say that at one point I did have a jerk at the end of the line.

"That's fishing," says my partner, Bob Schlosser, vice-president of the Saskatchewan Walleye Trail, an annual tour of southern fishing holes by a loyal league of competitive anglers. A past winner of some of the most prestigious fishing prizes in Canada, Schlosser blames the slow day on the late spring. Everything in nature seems to be running two weeks behind schedule this year in Saskatchewan, including the post-thaw appetite of the walleye. Our only saving grace is that of the 30 or so hardcore anglers on the lake this day, all getting an early read on the waters before the weekend's Last Mountain Lake Spring Walleye Classic, none is having much better luck. Only two fish of any significance took the bait.

Trail member Braeden Pyne of White City lugged in a 27-inch specimen.

That's well over seven pounds by the standard formula for catch-and-release estimates. The catch on

his catch, however, is that Braeden is 12 years old. Even more humbling for the adult rod-and-reelers is the 29-inch beast, likely a nine-pounder, caught by, ahem, a journalist. CTV's Jason Matity won the \$1,000 prize toward charity for the biggest (only) walleye caught by about a half-dozen of us media types invited to the pre-tournament practice.

Defeated, Schlosser and I have to live both with ourselves and with a disturbing second truth, an unpleasant notion for a pair of proud Saskatchewan boys: Matity was fishing with guides from Alberta.

Vikki and Darren Zeller, a registered nurse and oilfield worker from Medicine Hat, have been hitting the Saskatchewan Walleye Trail as part of their summers for the past half-dozen years. Even on this slow day of fishing five hours from home by truck, boat and trailer, they're smiling the grin of the addicted walleye enthusiast.

"We don't have lakes like this in Alberta," says Darren. "What we have are irrigation ponds."

His wife Vikki holds the record for biggest walleye ever caught in the Trail's 16-year history, a 13-pound, seven-ounce lunker from Lake Diefenbaker in 2004. "That's still the record?" she asks, in the unconcerned way of many members, all competitive, but who take to the lake mainly for the sport and fellowship. Canada's top walleye tournament series draws contestants from all over North America. Carolyn Hudson and Amber Wood, two young women from Red Lake and Kenora, Ont., prime walleye country in its own right, have made the trip. The Coggins brothers, Harley and Les, are back up from Arkansas and Texas for another year, still favoring Saskatchewan walleye over American bass and, as usual, passing on the fashionable wardrobe of today's fishermen for their trademark blue-jean overalls.

"I have the same disease as all boys out on the lake," says Vikki, who never held a fishing rod until she met Darren. "We come out here as much to fish as to camp and visit and to eat too much, to see old faces and tell war stories."

And, with a little bit of skill, maybe a dash of luck, to win \$10,000 for a weekend of fishing.

Here's how the Trail works: members join for \$30 a year, and compete in up to five two-day tournaments, all independently run by local service clubs or community organizations, but consolidated as a series. This year's tour began May 23-24 at Elbow, on Lake Diefenbaker, followed by the past weekend's Regina Beach event. From here it's on to Saskatchewan Landing July 18-19, Fort Qu'Appelle for Echo and Pasqua Lakes on Sept. 5-6, and finally a fall showdown, Sept. 11-12, with boats departing from Rowan's Ravine on Last Mountain Lake. Entry fee for each tournament runs roughly \$300 for each team of two, most of which money is paid back in prizes, from the lucrative first-place purse on downward so that about 20 of the 100 teams recoup their admission (gas, bait, and \$50,000 fishing boat notwithstanding). At the final Rowan's Ravine tournament, the top 40 point-getting teams compete for a new Lund boat, Mercury motor and trailer supplied by sponsors. Equally coveted are the year-end trophies, for the Trail's top anglers in various categories.

Along with unaffiliated events such as the \$50,000 annual Vanity Cup and \$25,000 Premier's Cup, both on walleye-rich Tobin Lake near Nipawin, and the Young Anglers Championship in Fort Qu'Appelle, a chance for fishermen under the age of 18 to advance to national playdowns and a top prize of a fly-in northern trip followed by a visit to Disney World, the Saskatchewan Walleye Trail puts on a world stage

the provincial official fish, offishully.

It's a sight to behold, 100 boats hitting the water at once, although a spectacle that Rob Furutani, Trail president, hopes isn't seen the wrong way.

"The public might spot all those fishermen out there and think it's a slaughter. It's not. We're tournament fishermen. We want those walleye safely returned to the lake so we can catch them again."

Rare is a dead fish. Points are awarded by weigh-in, in accordance with provincial possession limits: each live well can hold only two large fish and three under 21 inches. Any fish mangled or distressed beyond hope of survival must be counted among the five qualifiers and subsequently paid its the proper respects, which is on a plate alongside a twist of lemon and a side of beans. Almost all walleye do return to the lake.

Ten dollars of every entry fee goes back to the fish, money the Trail has spent on signs at the boat launches of its tournament sites to remind members and the public about proper fish-handling techniques for catch-and-release, on electronic scales for faster, safer weigh-in and on what anglers call a "hospital tank," a vat of oxygen-enriching circulating lake water to boost the constitution of any lethargic fish before its release. Plans are also in the early works to help pay for restoration of three government rearing ponds decommissioned in the mid-1990s at Edenwold to serve as a nursery, bringing the speck that is the newly hatched walleye fry to the fingerling stage before stocking water bodies.

And all this for, today, no fish?

Furutani apologizes, although why, I'm not sure. Walleye _ wallies, picks, 'eyes, Sander vitreus, by any other name _ are a persnickety prey by nature, which is one of the reasons Furutani himself believes competitive angling is becoming more popular by the year, with the Trail's own membership expected to hit a record 300 by the summer. "Walleye are a challenge. You have to use a little finesse. It's more of a hunt and seek than with northern pike or perch." At the right spot, the right time of day, the walleye can turn on like a switch, and a tournament becomes as fiercely fought as the feeding frenzy for the bait below.

Doesn't matter. If, as they say, at bad fishing beats a good day at work, then I've been doubly blessed. Speaking of which, if the bosses are reading, first of all, just joking about the "jerk" wisecrack, OK? And next week I'm off to another catch-and-release, actually more of a walk-and-gawk. I'll be buffalo-hunting, for a check-up on the first calves born to the wild bison herd re-introduced in deep southern grasslands.

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